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Uzbekistan: Current Developments and U.S. Interests

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Summary

Uzbekistan is an emerging Central Asian regional power by virtue of its relatively large population, important energy and other resources, and political prominence. Uzbekistan has offered broad-scale support for U.S.-led coalition operations in Afghanistan and lent diplomatic support for operations in Iraq. Uzbekistan has made limited progress in economic and political reforms, and many observers have criticized its human rights record. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Issue Brief IB93108, *Central Asia's New States*, updated regularly.

U.S. Policy

According to the Administration, Uzbekistan is vital to security in Central Asia, since it has the strongest military and is centrally located in the heart of the region. U.S. aid aims to enhance Uzbekistan's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security, bolster civil society and the management of energy and other natural resources, and relieve human suffering. Uzbekistan "is a key strategic partner in the Global War on Terror," and "consistently support[s] U.S. foreign policy goals." However, Uzbekistan's poor human rights record complicates bilateral relations (State Department, *Congressional Presentation for Foreign Operations for FY2005*). Because of its location and power potential, some U.S. policymakers argue that Uzbekistan should receive the most U.S. attention in the region.



Cumulative U.S. humanitarian and technical assistance budgeted for Uzbekistan in FY1992-FY2003 was \$595.3 million. The United States also facilitated the delivery of Department of Defense excess and privately donated commodities worth \$260 million in FY1992-FY2003. For FY2004, \$48.4 million in FREEDOM Support and other foreign

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aid is planned for Uzbekistan, and the Administration has requested \$53.2 million for FY2005. Security assistance for FY2005, including increased Foreign Military Financing (FMF), is aimed at helping Uzbekistan to secure its borders and respond to regional threats, to enhance military professionalism and reform, and to sustain cooperation with U.S. and coalition forces to combat terrorists and trafficking in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and narcotics. Because political reforms are lagging in Uzbekistan, U.S. aid in FY2005 will support grass-roots non-governmental organizations (NGOs), independent media, and judicial reform. Macroeconomic aid may be reprogrammed for health and NGO programs if market reforms lag. The United States also contributes to international and non-governmental organizations that aid Central Asia.

Basic Facts

Area and Population: Land area is 174,486 sq. mi., slightly larger than California. The population is 25.8 million (2003 est., *Economist Intelligence Unit*). Administrative subdivisions include the Karakalpak Republic.

Ethnicity: 80% are Uzbek, 5.5% Russian, 5% Tajik, 3% Kazakh, 2.5% Karakalpak, 1.5% Tatar, and others (2003 *CIA Factbook*, 1996 est.). Uzbeks are the most numerous Central Asian nationality. There are more than 1.2 million Uzbeks residing in Afghanistan, one million in Tajikistan, and a half-million in Kyrgyzstan.

Gross Domestic Product: \$9.0 billion in 2003; per capita GDP is about \$349 (*EIU* est., current prices).

Political Leaders: *President:* Islam Karimov; *Prime Minister:* Shavkat Mirziyoyev; *Chairman of the Oliy Majlis (legislature):* Erkin Khalilov; *Foreign Minister:* Sodiq Safoyev; *Defense Minister:* Qodir Ghulomov

Biography: Karimov, born in 1938, in 1983 became Uzbek Minister of Finance, and then Deputy Chairman of the Uzbek Council of Ministers. In 1989, he became First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party. In 1990, the Uzbek Supreme Soviet elected him to the newly created post of President, and he also became a member of the Soviet Communist Party Politburo. In December 1991, he was popularly elected President, winning 86% of the vote against opposition Erk Party candidate Mohammed Solikh. In 1995, Karimov orchestrated a popular referendum to extend his presidency until the year 2000, and won reelection in 2000.

Concerns about WMD proliferation led the Administration at the end of 2003 to waive restrictions on most anti-terrorism aid to Uzbekistan under authority provided by the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2003 (P.L.107-314). The Administration indicated that Uzbekistan had not satisfied Congressional requirements to respect human rights, as contained in Sec.1203(d)(6) of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Act of 1993 (P.L.103-160), making the waiver necessary. In FY2003 and FY2004, Congress also prohibited FREEDOM Support Act assistance to the central government of Uzbekistan unless the Secretary of State determines and reports that Uzbekistan is making substantial progress in meeting commitments to respect human rights, establish a multiparty system, and ensure free and fair elections, freedom of expression, and the independence of the media (P.L.108-7; P.L.108-199). Congress received a determination of progress in FY2003, but such a determination may not be possible in FY2004.

Contributions to the Campaign Against Terrorism

U.S. security ties with Uzbekistan prior to the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States proved useful in soliciting its support for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. In her testimony on April 8, 2004, to the Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice emphasized that pre-9/11 Administration efforts to counter global terrorism included increasing aid for such efforts in Uzbekistan. Karimov announced after 9/11 that “we are ready to consider offering the use of our airspace for security and humanitarian purposes in the fight against terrorists.” He argued that Uzbekistan would benefit from the elimination of terrorist camps in Afghanistan that threatened Uzbek security, but that the United

States should provide security guarantees to Uzbekistan. By early October 2001, U.S. and Uzbek media had reported that over 1,000 U.S. troops had arrived in Uzbekistan, and this number soon reached 1,500 or more and various aircraft. A formal agreement on U.S. use of the Khanabad airbase, near the town of Karshi was signed on October 7, just before the commencement of coalition air attacks in Afghanistan, and a joint U.S.-Uzbek statement pledged the two sides to consult in the event of a threat to Uzbekistan's security and territorial integrity. In March 2002, the two sides signed a "Strategic Partnership" accord that reiterated this nonspecific security guarantee to consult "on an urgent basis." The United States also pledged to re-equip Uzbekistan's military, and Uzbekistan pledged to "intensify democratic transformation" and increase media freedom. In early 2003, Uzbekistan was the only Central Asian state that joined the "coalition of the willing" that endorsed prospective U.S.-led coalition military operations in Iraq, but Karimov balked at sending troops. The *Washington Post* (March 25, 2004) reported that the Administration might be evaluating Uzbekistan for long-term access to military facilities for emergency training and staging by rapid-reaction forces.

Uzbekistan has benefitted from its alliance with the United States. In addition to security assurances and increased military and other aid, U.S. forces have helped eliminate much of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU; a terrorist group based in Afghanistan and dedicated to the forceful establishment of Islamic rule in Uzbekistan). Not only were IMU bases destroyed in Afghanistan, but IMU military leader Juma Namangani was reportedly killed. In April 2002, Karimov stated that intelligence had revealed that the IMU and other terrorists based in Afghanistan had planned to invade Uzbekistan that past autumn, and expressed Uzbekistan's "gratitude to the United States" for playing the "decisive role in relieving [this] tension and danger on Uzbekistan's southern borders," by virtue of "its resolve and its well-trained Armed Forces." The United States also aided Pakistan in a counterterrorism operation in March 2004 along the Afghan-Pakistan border that reportedly routed some al Qaeda and IMU forces, and which allegedly wounded Tahir Yuldashev, another IMU leader.

Foreign Policy and Defense

Home to more than half the population of Central Asia, Uzbekistan seeks to play a leading role in regional affairs. Karimov's priority in foreign policy has been to seek closer security ties with the United States, while maintaining working relations with Russia that do not overly compromise its independence. Uzbekistan, Russia, Armenia, and other Central Asian states signed a Collective Security Treaty in 1992 which calls for mutual assistance in the case of aggression against the parties. Uzbekistan withdrew from this pact in 1999, citing sovereignty issues. Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 (other members are Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), but later criticized it as ineffective. He reversed course in August 2003 and insisted that Uzbekistan host the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Center, which began operating in January 2004 to coordinate actions by the police and security departments of member-states. In explaining his reversal, Karimov stressed that Russia was playing a larger regional security role. Appearing to return to his earlier assessment, in April 2004 he criticized SCO members for failing to aid Uzbekistan during the March-April 2004 attacks, and concluded that Uzbekistan should "rely on its own power." Turkmen-Uzbek relations deteriorated in late 2002 following Turkmen accusations that Uzbek officials aided attempted coup plotters. Similarly, the Tajik president accused Uzbekistan of supporting a 1998 uprising in northern Tajikistan, and bilateral relations remain colored

by political and ethnic tensions. To safeguard its borders from terrorism, Uzbekistan mined its borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999, causing grievances. Uzbekistan calls for political rights for ethnic Uzbeks in the new Afghan government.

The Uzbek military is the most advanced among those of the Central Asian states. In 1992, the military absorbed many formations and units of the disbanded Soviet Turkestan Military District, headquartered in Uzbekistan. The armed forces consist of 50-55,000 troops in ground and air forces. There are also 17-19,000 internal security (police) troops and 1,000 national guard troops (*The Military Balance 2003-2004*). Physicist Qodir Ghulomov is the first civilian defense minister in the CIS. Uzbekistan's military doctrine proclaims that it makes no territorial claims on other states and adheres to nuclear non-proliferation. Military cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan is ensured through a 1992 Friendship Treaty, a 1994 military treaty, and a 1999 accord on combating terrorism and Islamic extremism, though in recent years Uzbekistan also has worked to build up its own defense capabilities, industries, and schools. Uzbekistan also has played an active role in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) since 1994 by participating in military exercises and training, including in the United States.

On February 16, 1999, six bomb blasts in Tashkent's governmental area by various reports killed 16-28 and wounded 100-351. In response, the government arrested dozens of suspects, including political dissidents. The motives for the bombing remain murky, but Karimov termed them an assassination attempt. In April 1999, he alleged that exiled Erk Party leader Mohammad Solikh led the plot, assisted by Afghanistan's Taliban and IMU co-leader Tahir Yuldashev. Solikh rejected accusations of a role in the bombings. In November 2000, the Uzbek Supreme Court tried Yuldashev, Namanganiy, and Solikh *in absentia* and sentenced the IMU leaders to death and Solikh to 15.5 years in prison.

Other security threats included the invasion of neighboring Kyrgyzstan in July-August 1999 by several hundred Islamic extremists who had fled repression in Uzbekistan or belonged to rogue groups in Tajikistan. The guerrillas were rumored to be seeking to create an Islamic state in south Kyrgyzstan as a springboard for a jihad in Uzbekistan. By mid-October 1999, they had been forced out of Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan assisted with air strikes, border troops, and materiel. The next August, dozens of IMU and other guerrillas again invaded Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan asked Uzbekistan for military aid, which was provided in exchange for free access to Kyrgyzstan's water supplies. Kyrgyzstan announced in late October 2000 that it had defeated the guerrillas. The IMU did not engage in major attacks in 2001 because of its increasing attention to al Qaeda's agenda. In September 2000, the State Department designated the IMU as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, stating that the IMU actively threatens U.S. interests and attacks American citizens, and stressing that the "United States supports the right of Uzbekistan to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity from the violent actions of the IMU."

A series of bombings and armed attacks began in Uzbekistan on March 28, 2004, and continued through April 1, reportedly killing 47 individuals. President Karimov asserted that the attacks were aimed against his government to "cause panic among our people, [and] to make them lose their trust in the policies being carried out." Prosecutor-General Rashidjon Qodirov on April 9 announced that a preliminary investigation had shown that Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT; an Islamic fundamentalist movement ostensibly pledged to peace but banned in Uzbekistan), in league with the IMU and other terrorists, had carried out the attacks. HT denied involvement. The Uzbek government tightened media censorship and

initially detained hundreds of suspects, according to some reports. U.S. Lt. Gen. David Barno, Combined Forces Commander for Afghanistan, visited Uzbekistan on April 13, 2004, to stress that “we stand with Uzbekistan in facing down this terrorist menace.” Air Force Secretary James Roche also visited three days later reportedly to discuss military aid and the status of the Karshi-Khanabad airbase. U.S. concerns in the wake of the attacks include increased instability that could affect the security of the airbase and future access, reduce coalition access to Afghanistan by air or ground transport, and heighten the danger of the leakage through or from Uzbekistan of WMD technology and know-how.

Political and Economic Developments

According to most analysts, democratization has made little headway in Uzbekistan. President Karimov in July 2003 denounced Western “lectures” on democracy, free markets, and human rights, questioning whether such “standards” could be reconciled with Uzbekistan’s “traditions and values.” Instead, he has advocated the gradual formation of a “just democracy,” based on Islamic Sharia principles that will ensure a strong government dedicated to social justice. Until then, a 1992 secular Constitution remains in place. In January 2002, Karimov orchestrated a constitutional referendum to create a bicameral legislature, termed the Oliy Majlis (much like that in Kazakhstan) and a future 7-year presidential term. In April 2002, Karimov introduced legislation to set up a 120-member, directly-elected lower chamber, the Legislative Chamber, and a 100-member upper chamber, the Senate. He proposed that the Senate be composed of 16 members he would appoint, with the rest selected by 14 local legislatures. He proposed that the lower chamber have most of the responsibility for drafting laws and, in December 2002, proposed that the Senate have the power to confirm the prime minister and other top officials, arguing that this would keep a future president from grasping for absolute power. Legislative elections are set for December 2004. Constitutional amendments approved in April 2003 established that — after the next presidential election, scheduled for January 2005 — the president would remain head of state but would relinquish power as head of government to the prime minister. Many observers argued that the presidency still would retain predominant constitutional powers. A law approved in April 2003 provided ex-presidents with immunity from prosecution, a legislative seat, and a pension criticized by some Uzbeks as extravagant.

Only pro-Karimov parties operate legally. The government in 2003 permitted the banned opposition parties Birlik (Unity) and Erk (Will) to hold public meetings for the first time in a decade but repeatedly has refused to legalize them, which is necessary for their participation in the upcoming legislative election. Government agents may have been involved in the supposed removal of Solikh as Erk Party leader and a party split at an October 2003 meeting. An opposition Free Farmers Party was formed in December 2003 and pledged to cooperate with Birlik. Unlike the opposition parties, a pro-regime Liberal Democratic Party gained legal status in November 2003.

The last election of the Oliy Majlis occurred in December 1999. The pro-Karimov parties and local councils (and some initiative groups) sponsored 1,010 candidates to vie for 250 seats. The OSCE sent only a limited mission that did not observe balloting, arguing that deficient electoral laws, official interference with nominations, and other irregularities precluded fair elections. The last presidential race was in January 2000. The two candidates were incumbent President Karimov and Abdulkhafiz Jalolov. Jalolov was nominated by the PDP — which he headed after Karimov resigned as head in 1996 — to

give the appearance of a contest. Jalolov endorsed Karimov during the campaign. Karimov won 91.9% of 12.1 million votes cast. The State Department concluded that “this election was neither free nor fair.”

The State Department’s *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2003* stated that Uzbekistan’s human rights remained very poor. Police and security forces tortured detainees and extorted bribes, mostly with impunity. A few police were disciplined in 2003 after detainee deaths. After the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture in February 2003 condemned “systematic” torture and ill-treatment, the Uzbek government pledged reforms, but torture did not appear to abate. The report states that the number of political prisoners was about 5,300-5,800, including secular oppositionists, human rights advocates, and alleged Islamic extremists. An atmosphere of repression stifled public criticism of the government. Nonetheless, several protests were staged in 2003-2004 against rising economic distress and religious persecution. The government owned and controlled the country’s three largest newspapers. Four government-controlled television stations monopolized national broadcasting. The government often harassed journalists, but there also appeared to be some leeway to criticize local bureaucracy. The government restricted freedom of religion, particularly targeting alleged Islamic extremism. There was some local harassment of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baptists. The government took some measures during the year to combat trafficking in women and children.

During the 1990s, President Karimov attempted to insulate Uzbekistan from the international economy in order to ensure social stability by maintaining a high degree of state ownership of production, subsidizing some basic goods and services, and by putting restrictions on trade and currency conversion. Although the economy began to turn around in 1996, economic growth remains sluggish, and the United States and international lenders continue to urge Uzbekistan to implement market reforms. Uzbekistan in October 2003 finally permitted its currency to be freely convertible but vitiated the reform by reducing money in circulation and tightening trade restrictions, including border closures and punitive tariffs on imports. These restrictions have fueled organized crime, corruption, consumer shortages, and wage arrears. The World Bank reports that the quality of life for most of the population has improved little or deteriorated in terms of healthcare, education, housing, and income. Uzbekistan is the world’s fifth largest cotton producer, and about 30% of the country’s economic activity is based on agriculture. The government closely controls this sector. The country also has abundant natural gas and petroleum reserves, but corruption and economic policies have discouraged foreign investment. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development announced in April 2004 that it would sharply limit its lending to Uzbekistan, citing the country’s failure to register opposition parties, the continuing torture of prisoners, media restrictions, and inadequate payments to cotton farmers.